

Conference Abstract

Museum, Library and Archives Partnership: Leveraging Digitized Data from Historical Sources

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Abstract

The Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University (MCZ), founded in 1859, has approximately 20 million extant and fossil invertebrate and vertebrate specimens. These historical collections continue to be a focus of research and teaching for the MCZ, Harvard and outside researchers.

The Ernst Mayr Library/Archives (EMLA) of the MCZ is a founding member of the Biodiversity Heritage Library (BHL), an international consortium with a mission to make biodiversity literature openly available for use. Meeting the needs of the MCZ is a priority for EML.

Museum/library and archives collaboration

One collaborative Museum/Library project was the digitization of approximately 81,000 MCZ specimen ledger pages/cards associated with various collections. These historical items, once digitized and deposited in the Harvard Digital Repository Service (DRS), were linked to the relevant specimen records in MCZbase, the museum-wide database. Over 1.2 million specimen records are now linked with digitized sources which benefit all users by adding to the provenance of the specimen data and allowing direct referral to the primary collection source.

The EMLA holds an extensive collection of field notes, letters and manuscripts of researchers associated with the MCZ. Collector records are a gold mine of unpublished observations, notes, sketches, specimen lists and narratives. They are primary source data at its most personal, and may be the only documentation of a scientist's thought processes and observations, particularly for unpublished materials.

William Brewster was a prominent late 19th, early 20th century naturalist associated with the MCZ Ornithology Department until his death in 1919. Brewster provided authoritative and novel additions to the knowledge of birds, and his detailed, long-term observations are the key to his published contributions. Brewster's unpublished scientific legacy is being digitized and deposited in the Harvard DRS and BHL by the EMLA. Transcribed notebook pages will be attached to images in BHL thus improving data discovery.

Brewster deposited over 45,000 specimens in the MCZ Ornithology Collection. Combining specimens and unpublished notes is an opportunity to link hidden data and enhance research capabilities. Next steps for this collaborative project include finely grained cross-linking of specific pages, correspondence and photographs to and from the MCZ's specimen database and BHL.

We show how MCZ has leveraged data in digital repositories to enhance and directly relate to MCZbase, with citations to notes, transcriptions and published literature. These collaborations enhance discoverability of hidden data while promoting cross-discipline research to interrelated historical sources.

Keywords

library, archives, digitization,, museum specimens, access, discoverability, digital repositories, field notes, linked data, Biodiversity Heritage Library

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